

Sanitized - Approved For Release : CIA-RDP75-00001R000300430001-7

Legend Sinks With Changing Sea

By KEYES BEECH

The Commercial Appeal-Chicago
Daily News Service

SAIGON, March 30. — In the top-level backfuffle of the

American mission here one figure has remained discreetly in the background.

He is Edward G. Lansdale, 59, the retired United States Air Force major general whose exploits as an intelligence operator and counter-insurgency expert stretching over three decades in Asia made him a near legend in his own time.

A controversial figure, Lansdale returned to South Vietnam in 1965 as special assistant to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. He is eligible to leave with Lodge within the next six weeks if he wants to.

But friends say Lansdale would like to stay, at least through the presidential elections now scheduled for Sept. 1. Whether he does stay apparently depends on incoming

Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker Lansdale, who began his intelligence career with OSS (Office of Strategic Services) in World War II, was a thinly disguised hero in the bestselling novel "The Ugly American."

He scored his greatest success as friend, adviser and image builder to the late Ramon Magsaysay, the magnetic Filipino who defeated the Communist-led Hukos and went on to become president of his country. Lansdale flourished in the free and easy atmosphere of the Philippines.

Lansdale and his loyal band of rugged individualists moved over to Saigon to attempt a similar job for the late President Ngo Dinh Diem, who unfortunately was no Magsaysay.

Saigon, then more than now, oozed intrigue. In the aftermath of the French collapse warring religious sects with their own private armies contended for power. The defeated French hung on and conspired against Diem. Diem himself seemed paralyzed. The ubiquitous Communist Viet Minh waited for the government to fall like an over-ripe plum.



Edward G. Lansdale

Through this sea of intrigue Lansdale moved with great flair, a revolutionary romantic with a pocketful of CIA cash. "He was a great broken field runner," said an admiring but critical colleague who worked under Lansdale in those days.

In 1955 the austere and Catholic Diem shut down Saigon's roaring vice dens, including the city's most notorious bordello, the House of Mirrors. This precipitated a clash with the Binh Xuyen, the gangster sect of river grates who paid Emperor Bao Dai, living the good life in the French Riviera, a million dollars for a monopoly on gambling and prostitution in Saigon.

When the Binh Xuyen began dropping mortar shells in Diem's front yard, the President struck back and the war was on. In the critical period that followed Lansdale played a key role in swinging United States support behind the beleaguered Diem at a time when the American Embassy, frightened at all the shooting, was urging Washington to dump him.

One night when loyal troops

were still having sporadic fire-fights with the Binh Xuyen, the telephone rang at Lansdale's house during dinner. The news was bad. Binh Xuyen assassins had just gunned down Trinh Minh The, a pro-Diem general, as he crossed a Saigon River bridge.

"It's really too bad," said Lansdale, going back to his dinner. "He was a good guy, moderate, democratic, the kind of guy you could do business with. Besides he cost \$25,000."

The following year, with the Diem regime apparently firmly established, Lansdale returned to Washington. At one time during the Kennedy Administration he was considered, but rejected by more conventional minds, as ambassador to Saigon.

When Lansdale finally did return to Saigon in 1965, he headed a 12-man team of counterinsurgency specialists that included several who had worked for him in the Philippines and Saigon. They were good men but time had passed Lansdale by. The South Vietnam Lansdale had known 10 years before no longer existed, at least in American terms. The big buildup was on. Everything was being "organized" along tightly compartmentalized lines.

No matter in which direction Lansdale moved, he stepped on somebody's toes. There was no room for a broken field runner. Accustomed to meeting Vietnamese in the informal atmosphere of his home under the mellowing

influence of alcohol, song and folk music, Lansdale found business was now done over conference tables.

Outranked and outflanked, Lansdale became a prisoner of the bureaucracy, besides he was a victim of his own advance publicity. Because he was a glamorous figure, some people got the impression that Lansdale and his team had a magic solution to the war. On

top of that his team's role never was clearly defined.

Under the strains the team cracked. Some quit in disgust and frustration. Only five, including Lansdale, are left of the original twelve.

Given the rank of minister, Lansdale has functioned mainly as liaison man between the Embassy and the South Vietnamese Pacification Ministry. As time went by his influence gradually declined.

Because his advice to Vietnamese government leaders differed from the embassy's, Lansdale was forbidden to see Vietnamese friends who trust and confide in him.

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